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ABSTRACT

The Internet enables teachers to enhance the teaching and learning of history through quick and extensive access to primary sources. Introducing and using primary sources in the history classroom will almost certainly lead to active learning and development of critical thinking, reasoning, and problem solving. This Digest discusses: (1) types and uses of primary sources; (2) using the Internet to obtain primary sources; and (3) exemplary World Wide Web sites providing primary sources. Primary sources are not limited to printed documents such as letters, newspapers, diaries, and poems. Artifacts (art, pottery, articles of clothing, tools, and food), places (ecosystems, dwellings, and other buildings and structures), sounds (music, stories, and folklore), and images (paintings, photographs, and videos/movies) can also be considered primary sources. Introducing and using primary sources in the history classroom leads to active learning and to the development of critical thinking and enhancement of the learning process by allowing students to construct their own understandings of people, events, and ideas. Precautionary measures to maintain safe learning environments when using online primary sources are given. Examples of user friendly and efficient search engine Web sites also are given. A few of the primary source sites offered include the American Memory Historical Collections for the National Digital Library (maintained by the Library of Congress), the National Security Archive (founded in 1985 by a group of journalists and scholars that had obtained documentation from the U.S. government under the Freedom of Information Act), and the National Park Service (features over 2,300 National Historic Landmarks. Many other primary source Web sites are offered. (Contains 10 references.) (LB)

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By
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Using Primary Sources on the Internet to Teach and Learn History

By Deanne Shiroma

The Internet enables teachers to enhance the teaching and learning of history through quick and extensive access to primary sources. This Digest discusses (1) types and uses of primary sources, (2) using the Internet to obtain primary sources, and (3) exemplary World Wide Web sites providing primary sources.

Types and Uses of Primary Sources. Primary sources are the building blocks of history. These traces of the human past include ideals, customs, institutions, languages, literature, material products, and the physical remains of various people (Craver 1999, 8).

Primary sources are not limited to printed documents such as letters, newspapers, diaries, and poems. Artifacts (art, pottery, articles of clothing, tools, and food), places (ecosystems, dwellings, and other buildings and structures), sounds (music, stories, and folklore), and images (paintings, photographs, videos/ movies) can also be considered primary sources.

A commonly overlooked type of primary source is historic places, the sites of significant events, which communicate the past to students in numerous ways. Historic places "speak through relationships to their settings, their plan and design, their building materials, their atmosphere and ambience, their furniture, and other objects they contain" (Harper 1997, 1).

Primary sources are keys to reconstructing and interpreting the past. Teachers and students alike might consider this adage: learning is not received; it is achieved. Introducing and using primary sources in the history classroom will almost certainly lead to active learning and development of critical thinking, reasoning, and problem solving (Craver 1999, 10-12). As students work with primary sources, they have the opportunity to do more than just absorb information; they can also analyze, evaluate, recognize bias and contradiction, and weigh the significance of evidence presented by the source (Percoco 1998).

Primary sources enhance the learning process by allowing students to construct their own understandings of people, events, and ideas. Students can "uncover, discover, and reflect on content and their conceptions of such through inquiry, investigation, research, and analysis" (Marlow & Page 1998, 11).

Using the Internet to Access Primary Sources. The Internet is a virtual gateway to an abundance of on-line educational resources; it is important to remember, however, that much of the information on the Internet is uncensored and unregulated. Students may be exposed to inappropriate Web sites. Therefore, teachers may wish to take precautionary measures to maintain safe learning environments, such as searching the Web to locate and screen the primary source material for appropriateness and validity prior to using it in class. This conserves classroom time, overcomes the limitations of the one-computer classroom, and reduces the need to purchase Internet filtering software.

Until recently, "surfing" was the typical approach to finding information on the World Wide Web. Surfing begins when the user starts on a particular World Wide Web site and follows links from page to page (making some educated guesses along the way), hoping to sooner or later arrive at the desired information. When you have time to explore, surfing can be fun. But when you need to find information quickly, surfing can be inefficient and ineffective. A number of tools exist that enable users to find information on the World Wide Web more effectively and efficiently. One such tool is a search engine.

Though they are similar, not all search engines are created equal. Selecting the best search engine depends upon the user's experience level and an understanding of which elements in the documents are indexed by each search engine. Meta-search engines, which search multiple search engines simultaneously, are preferable. One example of a meta-search engine is Ask Jeeves <http://www.askjeeves.com>. Its user-friendly interface allows searching using either questions or keywords. Another meta-search engine is MetaCrawler <http://www.metacrawler.com>, which pools and collates pages found on several of the major search engines with consistently reliable and accurate results.

For those wishing to avoid sites unsuitable for children, several strategies can be used. The first and most desirable strategy is to encourage appropriate use and good decision making by students. This does not, however, eliminate the risk that students will inadvertently or unintentionally come upon sites containing offensive material. Another strategy is to use "child-safe" search engines that index age-appropriate sites and focus on the specific needs and interests of children. One of the best "child-specific" search engines is Ask Jeeves For Kids <http://www.ajkids.com>, which allows children to search by asking questions in plain English (also known as "natural language" searching) and offers options to help narrow the search in cases of broad or ambiguous questions. Other major search engines for children are CyberSleuth Kids <http://cybersleuth-kids.com/>, a search guide for K-12 students, and KidsClick Web Search <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/KidsClick!/>, created for children by librarians (Braun & Risinger 1999).

Exemplary Web Sites with Primary Sources. One of the best Web sites for obtaining primary sources is the American Memory Historical Collections for the National Digital Library <http://rs6.loc.gov/ammem/amhome.html>. Maintained by the Library of Congress, American Memory features an extensive collection of documents in original format, including manuscripts, sheet music, printed texts, maps, motion pictures, photos and prints, and sound recordings. Following are examples of sites that focus on more specific types of primary source material.

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The National Security Archive <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/> was founded in 1985 by a group of journalists and scholars that had obtained documentation from the U.S. government under the Freedom of Information Act. Associated with George Washington University's Gelman Library, the Archive is one of the world's largest non-governmental repositories of declassified government documents on international affairs. Current collections include Chile, China, Cuba, Guatemala, Honduras, India-Pakistan, Iran, Japan, Mexico, Russia, Eastern Europe, and nuclear history.

Authorized under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and administered by the National Park Service, the National Register of Historic Places <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/nrhome.html> features over 2,300 National Historic Landmarks. Properties listed in the Register include districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that are significant in American history, architecture, archaeology, engineering, and culture.

National Anthems of the World <http://www.emulateme.com/anthems/> contains audio clips of many national anthems. The site also contains information about the economy, geography, history, people, and government of the countries.

There are so many Web sites offering a wide variety of primary sources that it is beyond the scope of this Digest to list them all. Here is a brief list of additional sites:

- National Archives and Records Administration: The Digital Classroom:
  http://www.nara.gov/educational/classrm.html
- On-line Archival Collections - Center for Women's History & Culture:
  http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/women/digital.html
- Eye Witness: History Through The Eyes Of Those Who Lived It:
  http://www.ibiscom.com/index.html
- Repositories of Primary Sources:
  http://www.uidaho.edu/special-collections/Other.Repositories.html
- Euro Docs: Primary Historical Documents From Western Europe:
  http://www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/eurodocs/homepage.html
- Social Studies Sources:
  http://www.indiana.edu/~socialst/

By encouraging their students to locate and work with primary sources available through the Internet, teachers empower them to develop inquiry skills through active learning methods. Students learn to ask questions and seek answers independently. Thus, they are challenged to process information and comprehend their complex world.

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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